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Social Identity of Prison Service Officers as a Dispositional Group

Introduction

One of the basic conditions for a society's development is its safety. According to Abraham Maslow, apart from physiological needs, safety is one of the major needs naturally related to each human being. However, safety is not only a need resulting from the vital functions of a human body. It is also connected with social control aiming at ensuring the social order by means of applicable mechanisms. The main elements which ensure that order include specially created, specialised structures whose goal is to prevent and mitigate hazards impacting certain communities.

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, in democratic societies, "nobody is forced to rush to another person's aid and nobody has the right to expect this aid, as people of democracy are independent and weak at the same time" (de Tocqueville 1967: 451). Thus, specialised structures are established with the view to somehow taking over citizens' duties regarding their protection and aid. These structures are referred to as dispositional groups. They operate for the benefit of the country citizens or members of smaller communities and are obliged to ensure that applicable regulations and standards are complied with. Such groups extend aid to members of the structures for the benefit of which they are appointed, as a result of which they risk their health or even lives. Officers and employees belonging to such groups fulfil their tasks in difficult conditions and are subject to strict hierarchisation or even isolation. Members of dispositional groups are required to engage in immaculate conduct, adhere to certain beliefs and fulfil their professional duties in an uncompromising manner. Stringent requirements often do not go hand in hand with attractive remuneration and prestige. Moreover, the perceptions of the society for the benefit of which dispositional groups work, are frequently negative and stereotypical.

This paper focuses on the subject of the social identity of Prison Service Officers constituting a paramilitary dispositional group appointed with the view to protecting the society against individuals who pose risks to it.

Social Identity in the Sociological Perspective

The etymology of the term “identity” goes back to the Latin term *identicus* meaning “sameness, being the same” (Kopaliński 1983). This term is incredibly complex and difficult to define. Nevertheless, representatives of various fields have been concentrating on this issue, that is, from philosophy through anthropology to medicine. However, it remains chiefly in the area of interests of such groups as psychologists and sociologists. Although numerous researchers treat identity as the fundamental element of inquiries regarding functioning of individuals in a society, taking into account the constantly changing conditions, so far, this term has not been unambiguously defined. Such factors as the complexity of this term and a large number of sciences investigating it have resulted in the fact that it is impossible to provide an explicit definition of this term, neither on the level of individual sciences nor on the meta-level.

This article focuses exclusively on the sociological understanding of identity. Shortly speaking, the sociological meaning of identity refers to the question of how a person understands himself/herself and what is important to them. This may refer to various sources, for example, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, social class, or, as in this paper, to a profession. Identity shows itself as a factor that is socially assigned, confirmed, and transformed. To a certain extent, a human being shapes the image of himself/herself by seeing how they are perceived by others. Irena Borowik states that identity in the sociological meaning is “always acquired in a certain type of society and culture, and includes patterns present in this society and culture. It is made possible thanks to social interactions and functioning of a looking-glass self” (Borowik 2011: 21). Such factors as how others perceive us and what behaviours they expect from us shape our own images, that is, the above-mentioned looking-glass self. One must remember that, from the sociological perspective, the view on human identity is defined by its constant changeability. This changeability derives not only from extensive cultural diversity and significant diversification of modern societies in which an individual functions, but also from the evolution of social awareness.

Sociology differentiates between two types of identity, that is, social and individual identity. *Social identity* refers to individuals’ features ascribed to them by others. Thanks to these features, individuals are perceived, in a certain regard, as “the same as others,” which constitutes the basis for creating collective identities. *Individual or personal identity* refers to self-development processes in which such factors as the feeling of individuality and unique individual’s approach to the surrounding world are created. An individual achieves the sense of being himself/herself during a continuous dialogue with the outside world (Melchior 1990: 26).

The social dimension of identity analysed in this paper enables individuals to create bonds with certain groups within which they function, and the main foundation for this process is “the presence of a community an individual iden-

tifies with or participates in” (Hałas 2006: 255). Thus, social identity may refer to individual’s relations with family, friends ethnic, or professional group. This identity may be defined as “group-organised type of individual’s identity based on common heritage elements, traditions, symbols, values, and group norms making them similar to or different from other people located in a closer or farther social space. [...] it forces a human to occupy a certain place in the well-known and unknown world and provides them with personal features which are comparable and relativised to a social context” (Paleczny 2008: 22). This meaning of identity forces us to connect the “external” and objective values, social norms as well as symbols, and traditions present in a group with the subjective elements present “inside” a person, that is, certain stances, personality, emotions, tempers, experiences, or memories. Émile Durkheim wrote about it, drawing attention to the fact that a human comprises two beings which, when merged, constitute a complete social being (Durkheim 1977: 51). In order to avoid misleading definitions, it is necessary to highlight the fact that social identity may refer both to individuals and communities. This difference is vital taking into account the fact that one term may define two different categories of phenomena, which may result in incoherent definitions (cf. Melchior 1990).

Although social identity refers to individuals (or defined groups), it cannot be created without the society’s participation. It is always acquired as a result of interactions with other individuals or groups functioning in a given society or culture. It is possible thanks to the above-mentioned looking-glass self which constitutes an imposed (by others) method of clarifying a person’s place in a society (Paleczny 2008: 26). This definition of one’s place in a society is particularly important for dispositional groups which not only function within a society, but also serve its purposes.

Shaping the Social Identity of Prison Service Officers as a Dispositional Group

The social identity of Prison Service Officers has a peculiar form due to the isolated environment, officers’ roles, and group members’ perspective. The role of a Prison Service Officer is connected with being in constant danger resulting from interactions with dangerous individuals, presence of weapons as well as being at disposal, hierarchisation, and the necessity to lead a particular way of life. Moreover, membership in such units is connected both with self-identification and being identified by “others” as an element of this group. Here, the important issue is which elements connect members of this group and which differentiate them from other groups. Social identity of a unit does not exist in itself, as it depends on the “participating individuals’ identification. It does not

exist on its own, but only to the extent it is expressed by certain individuals. It is weak or strong to the extent it is present in group members' thoughts and actions" (Assmann, in Straub 2006: 1133).

The Prison Service Act states that "Prison Service is a uniformed and armed apolitical unit reporting to the Minister of Justice and having its own organisational structure" (Act of 9 April 2010 on the Prison Service), which defines it as a paramilitary organisation with its own hierarchy. From the sociological point of view, Prison Service is one of dispositional groups and constitutes an important, even though often indiscernible, element of the society (Zagórski 1997). According to Zdzisław Zagórski, Prison Service belongs to the groups whose goal is to protect the social order or, impose this order, if necessary, even under the threat of using force (Zagórski 2000). One must note that Prison Service has a clear paramilitary character, even though it is organised similarly to an army. It is treated as a paramilitary organisation due to its function, that is, ensuring social order and internal safety, without the direct participation in military operations.

While entering service in penitentiary units, officers enter a unit operating in isolation and it is necessary for them to take a unique role. The total⁸ character of Prison Service makes it a unique place of service. Undoubtedly, each institution having a total character tends to "take possession" of its members. However, correction facilities tend to intensify this process in such a manner that they leave their mark not only on the inmates, but also (or most of all) on the personnel. Complying with rules and regulations, tight organisation of the daily schedules, being under the superiors' power, and 24-hour working days are the basic features characterising a correction facility, which must be adhered to by both the inmates and the personnel.⁹ It must also be noted that representatives of this unit are socially marked to a substantial extent. Firstly, it results from a number of external identifying elements, such as their uniforms and isolation. Secondly, certain "internal" elements (e.g., values held) must also be taken into account. Penitentiary facilities are institutions whose "task is to protect the society from harm inflicted in a conscious manner" (Goffman, in Dereczynski (ed.) 1975: 151). According to Goffman, each such institution is aimed at transforming humans and conducting enforced experimentation with the view to changing a person's "self." As regards correction facilities, this seems to refer not only to inmates, but also the Prison Service personnel.

⁸ These statements are quoted from Erving Goffman, who defined a total institution as "a place where a large number of persons stay and work and these persons are in a similar situation as they are temporarily separated from the rest of the society and lead formalised lives" (cf. E. Goffman, *Instytucje totalne. O pacjentach szpitali psychiatrycznych i mieszkańcach innych instytucji totalnych*. Sopot 2011, p. 11).

⁹ This terminology is used by Goffman (cf. E. Goffman, *Instytucje totalne*) to define two extremes on which persons connected with a total institution exist. The "inmates" constitute a much larger extreme group subordinated to a smaller group of supervisors, that is, the "personnel."

Such unique service conditions present in penitentiary facilities result in the fact that reasons for taking employment in such institutions vary, and the service itself has an intense impact on the personnel's identity. Prison Service Officers are constantly subjected to interactions with inmates dubbed as the "social waste." Moreover, they are dependent on their position in the strictly hierarchised structures of penitentiary facilities. This results in the fact that they function within complicated human relations in an institution which is even more complicated due to its relations with the environment treating the officers stereotypically and with aversion. Prison Service Officers must fulfil tasks which often contradict their own beliefs. Additionally, they fulfil these tasks feeling threatened by the inmates. Thus, they live in constant fear and stress, which exerts a negative impact on them. In her studies, Aleksandra Szymanowska highlights this complexity of the scope of Prison Service Officers' tasks by stating that their tasks involve a large spectrum of elements from protection of the society against "convicts dangerous for the society and other inmates, through providing them with appropriate living standards, to the rehabilitation and care activities" (Szymanowska 1998: 27).

It must be noted that Prison Service Officers not only fulfil their tasks in unique conditions, but their tasks are also unconventional. The Prison Service is included in a dispositional group defined "as a hybrid social and occupational creation connecting professional units of total institutions [...] organised within a society, and fully professional units assigned by this society, which are armed and have the power of ruling and resorting to force [...]. Their characteristic feature is a high level of hierarchisation resulting in intra-group stratification, facilitating the achievement of statutory objectives" (Maciejewski, in Czekaj (ed.) 2011: 302). Even though this definition is fairly general, it enables us to understand the concept of units responsible for citizens' safety.

According to Zagórski, members of dispositional groups are at their administrators' disposal in order to obtain necessary means of support (Zagórski, in Leczykiewicz (eds.) 2000: 13). Here, availability means the possibility of having something or somebody at your disposal (Maciejewski and Hofman 2013: 153). Two types of availability may be differentiated. The broad definition of availability is connected with a generally assumed approach to typical activities for which a given structure has been established (Maciejewski 2012: 39). On the other hand, a narrow definition of availability is connected with the specificity defined by the scope or speed of actions taken. Thus, dispositional groups are such social structures whose availability is defined by the narrow meaning of this word, due to the specialised and unique character of actions taken within a relatively limited scope (Maciejewski 2012: 40). According to Stanisław Jarmoszko, the essence of serving in uniformed services is the officers' subjecting to their subordinates' power and being at their disposal, that is, being ready to submit to the superiors. Thus, availability contains an element of potency to act and uncertainty (Jarmoszko, in Maciejewski 2006: 35). It is also worth highlighting

that administrators subordinate dispositional persons not only through their commands, but also through the possibility of forcing their obedience using applicable legal measures (Bazsak, in Dojwa and Maciejewski (eds) 2007: 21). Moreover, the society which they serve and in which they function is also an overriding administrator of dispositional groups (including the Prison Service).

This availability in conjunction with unique, isolated working conditions seem to be the main features that influence the shaping of the social identity of Prison Service Officers. It is worth noting that the officers do not constitute a homogenous group. These are people of different sexes, education, professional experience, character traits, viewpoints, and values. These varied individuals are restricted by an inflexible social pattern including all the above-mentioned elements, but still strictly regulated by the Prison Service Act (Article 38 Act of 9 April 2010 on the Prison Service). Nevertheless, this pattern is not identical with the way the society perceives the Prison Service Officers, looking at this unit from the angle of negative stereotypes. This divergence makes shaping of a coherent social identity additionally difficult.

While analysing the social identity of Prison Service Officers, one must note the history of this unit. The extensive history and tradition of this service seem to combine in the social identity of the Prison Service. The last twenty-five years seem to be particularly important in this respect as, after numerous stormy years, the Prison Service has achieved a relatively stable position and its objectives have been clearly defined. Moreover, the personnel has been almost fully replaced, which initiated the creation of a new identity of the Prison Service. The new officers' identity was being formed along with the new identity of the Polish state. The social and political transformations at the end of the 1980s resulted in altering the Prison Service Officers' needs as regards building their social identity. This results from the fact that each social change influences the communities involved in this change. Such issues as the process of making structures apolitical, increase in significance of Prison Service activities, and gradual opening to the external environment have become important factors supporting the process of creating a coherent identity for the officers.

Working in the above-mentioned conditions and the changing social and political background may have a corrupting impact on the officers' decisions about their own selves, which does not contribute to the creating of a coherent image of themselves and other colleagues. Alternatively, difficulties in discharging one's professional duties may result in the tightening of bonds among colleagues, and such factors as the necessity to achieve given goals and face similar problems may support the process of identification with other officers. This results from the fact that social identity stems from factors cohesive for a given community and appears during interactions (e.g., empathy, common interests, similar views). It is what "binds certain people together, i.e. includes them in a community whose members may at least partially be characterised in a cohesive manner

as they describe themselves in such a manner” (Straub 2006: 1134). It must be highlighted that no dispositional group (including the Prison Service) is created spontaneously, but it is strictly formalised and limited by a number of rules and acts. Thus, certain standards are initially imposed from the top down, which provides foundations to build an identity. However, such identity does not exist before there psychological bonds between officers and certain attitudes towards one another appear, apart from the restrictive regulatory frameworks.

Conclusions

Numerous factors exert impact on the social identity of Prison Service Officers and other dispositional groups. Such factors as the uniqueness of this unit and its officers’ awareness regarding the fulfilment of a particular mission for the benefit of the whole society create the core around which other social identity elements are placed. The officers’ feeling of togetherness is reinforced by their uniforms, ceremonies, and rich history and tradition of the unit.

It is difficult to unambiguously indicate the existence of one coherent pattern or scheme for the social identity of Prison Service Officers as a professional group. Due to the fact that they remain within a paramilitary dispositional group, Prison Service Officers function in unique, difficult, and isolated conditions stemming from changeable social and political context. Such conditions require maintaining relations with other officers in order to successfully fulfil the ordered tasks. On the other hand, for the same reasons, it is necessary to maintain at least partial separation from the outside world. Moreover, one may assume that Prison Service Officers are “hostages” of certain stereotypes, which hinders the process of creating a cohesive social identity. However, there are several elements facilitating its creation. They include, for instance, sense of mission, uniforms, tradition and ceremonies, historical awareness, service ethos, work environment, professional aspirations, necessity for cooperation, working in difficult conditions, being at disposal, as well as leading the same lifestyles and holding the same beliefs.

One must remember that social awareness is a process, not a state. This results in the fact that it is subject to various changes arising from various factors, that is, from the changes on an individual level through the changes on the facility level to global transformations. It is difficult to describe all the elements influencing the Prison Service Officers’ identity, but only in-depth and comprehensive analyses may enable us to define the actual state of affairs. Thus, the above deliberations should be treated as an introduction to further analyses of the identity of dispositional groups ensuring the safety of all citizens.

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